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ABSTRACT

High school students writing research papers face the problem of finding audiences for their work, especially today when the consensus is that any kind of good writing requires some hypothetical audience or reader. Unless students are in a composition class where they write to someone special, they have difficulty grasping the idea of audience. Discussing the opening lines of Hemingway's "A Farewell to Arms" helps students grasp the idea that Hemingway creates his readers along with his story. To make the transition from Hemingway's fiction to their own research projects, students need to study contemporary nonfiction to see how these writers create audiences. Choices abound for good nonfiction, among them John Madson's "Where the Sky Began: Land of the Tallgrass Prairie," or "Telling Lives: The Biographer's Art" and "A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century," by Barbara Tuchman. For other students, audiences can be created through the use of "The Journal of Popular Culture." Students can assume they are writing their paper to be "published." By finding an appropriate audience, students can write lively, informative papers. (HOD)

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THE FICTIONALIZED READER:

AUDIENCES FOR HIGH-SCHOOL WRITERS OF RESEARCH PAPERS

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THE FICTIONALIZED READER:

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High-school research writers face the problem of finding audiences for their work, especially today when the consensus is that any kind of good writing requires some hypothetical audience or reader. Research writers, however, face special difficulties. Student research writers aiming for teacher as audience produce work that might well have been written for that indominable fiction, Miss Dove, who, some of us well remember, ran a tight classroom in the old days when gray-haired teachers wore buns and round spectacles and never burned out. Those students aiming for no particular audience create problems, too. They sometimes produce work obviously written for Piers Plowman, removed by centuries from the concerns of today. Because I have kicked out both Dove and Plowman as audiences for my students, I have had to ask myself, "Who is left?" One answer comes from Jacques Barzun, who responds, "The educated reader." (See Barzun and Henry F. Graff, The Modern Researcher, Revised Edition, New York, Harcourt, Brace and World, 1970.) This "educated reader" is fine for the mature writer producing a long paper, but my job as teacher demands that I help these students find suitable audiences for their work. Thus, I want to describe my methods of creating these audiences for student writing.

First, unless students are in composition class where they write to someone special, they grasp the idea of audience with difficulty.

Before beginning research, I try to help them understand this idea. With the opening lines of Hemingway's A Farewell to Arms as example, the class and I discuss the meaning of audience or fictionalized reader. (For the ideas in this discussion I am indebted to Walter Ong, "The Writer's Audience Is Always a Fiction," PMLA Vol. 90, No. 1, January 1975, pp. 9-21. In his article, Ong announces his indebtedness to Walker Gibson, Tough, Sweet, and Stuffy, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1966. Interested readers should examine both sources.) Ong cites Hemingway's passage, which goes like this: "In the late summer of that year we lived in a house in a village that looked across the river and the plain to the mountains." Then Ong shows how Hemingway uses this spare, terse style to fictionalize his reader. Using much of Ong's dialogue, I discuss Hemingway's creation of his audience:

"The late summer of that year . . ."

"What year?" reader replies, and gathers that there is no need to know.

"Across the river . . ."

Again, "What river?" Again, reader realizes that there is no need to know; reader apparently is supposed to know. Otherwise, wouldn't more details be provided?

"And the plain . . . "

"What plain?" reader asks.

"The plain. You know--remember?"

As Ong points out and as I repeat in class, the reader is assumed to have prior knowledge, to know about the summer, the river, the plain--everything--and thus is cast as Hemingway's close companion. Obviously, Hemingway is tight-lipped because description would bore a boon companion. Usually familiar with at least one novel by Hemingway, my students grasp the idea quickly: Hemingway creates his readers along with his story.

To make the transition from Hemingway's fiction to their own research projects, students need to study contemporary non-fiction to see how these writers create audiences. Choices abound for good non-fiction. Currently I am using John Madson's new book about prairies, because it seems to me that Madson creates a reader and then takes this reader with him as an enthusiastic observer. (See Where the Sky Began: Land of the Tallgrass Prairie, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1982.)

In Where the Sky Began, Madson, like Hemingway, converts his reader into his boon companion. To read the book is to visit prairies with John Madson, to become his friend in seeing a buck deer leap out of its bed of prairie grasses; in learning about the prairie grasses themselves with such names as Indian and Big Bluestem; in knowing a farmer friend from Mt. Pleasant, Iowa, who has designed a hay mower with a special bar to flush pheasants out of harm's way; and, at the end of the book, in knowing that "young prairie-born winds comb tallgrasses, carrying larksong and scent of ancient gardens. . . ." Like Hemingway, Madson fictionalizes his reader. Instead of saying "What mountains?" as with Hemingway, reader says, "Yes, I see that bit of prairie down that narrow road by those railroad tracks and I'm with you, John; I want to save it from the real estate developer." Madson creates a reader and wins his audience; students can do likewise.

To analyze a similar writing technique, students can turn from prairie to history. Historian Barbara Tuchman not only creates her audience but also considers its creation essential to good writing. I have my students read the passage in Telling Lives in which Tuchman says: "If it takes two to make love or war or tennis, it likewise takes two to complete the function of the written work. I never feel my writing is born or has an independent existence until it is read. . . . first catch your reader." (Marc Pachter, ed., Telling Lives: The Biographer's Art, Washington, DC, New Republic Books/National Portrait Gallery, 1979.)

To see Tuchman "catch" her reader, I have my students read a small part of A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1978). Students observe that representative man of the Middle Ages, Baron de Coucy, lead Tuchman's audience into the "calamitous 14th century". They note that the structure of the book rests upon the story of the de Coucy family. Once enamoured of this family, the unresisting reader becomes Tuchman's fictionalized companion in observing the panorama of the entire century.

Discussion of audience provides fun for academically talented students as well as for their teachers. What about the average student, though? What happens to Robert, who isn't quite sure he is even going to college? He has followed my discussion on Hemingway's audience, but he lost out on Madson and Tuchman. Now Robert doesn't even have a topic, much less an audience. Our discussion goes something like this:

"I can't find a topic I like."

"What subjects do you especially like in school?"

"Not any in particular."

"What do you like to read?"

"Nothing."

Stifling my caustic comments, I ask, "Do you ever read anything for fun, out of school?"

"Louis L'Amour's western novels."

"Got you now, Robert," I sigh to myself. "You are committed."

But I am going to have to point out both topic and audience to Robert, who knows full well that English Teachers do not place L'Amour among Literary Lions, even though his bestselling books are fun to read. Finally Robert and I agree that he will examine selected heroes from

L'Amour's westerns in relation to the concept of hero, which he will research. Now Robert requires an audience for his study of the western hero in selected novels by Louis L'Amour. To supply this audience, I pull out a copy of The Journal of Popular Culture (hereafter called JPC), and Robert and I continue our discussion:

"Look, Robert, pretend you're writing about L'Amour's heroes so that other readers of his novels who like them as much as you do can share your analysis. Assume that you will reach these people by publishing your article in this magazine." (Show him JPC.)

Robert looks slightly interested.

I flip open JPC to the table of contents and let Robert glimpse titles. In the Summer, 1982, issue of JPC, Robert and I notice an article called "The Heyday of the Football Novel" and another entitled "Alice's Big Sister: Fantasy and the Adolescent Dream." Mildly interested in these published titles, Robert agrees to write about L'Amour so that his research can be "published" in this "magazine".

With a ready-made reader to share the fun of heroism in several westerns by Louis L'Amour, Robert has a chance of writing a good paper. Without L'Amour and JPC, his chances of success would be slim indeed. I envision success for Robert.

Writing for JPC appeals to strongly academic students, too. Using ideas gleaned from Erving Goffman's Gender Advertisements (New York, Harper Colophon Books, 1976), another student is examining selected magazine ads and is comparing her findings with those of Goffman. She too plans to "publish" in JPC. Another student, a lover of horror movies, directs her film analysis toward JPC.

Teachers can expand the list of magazines whose readers can serve as audience for high-school research writers. However, for whatever

reasons, I have had success with student writing directed toward JPC. The official publication of the Popular Culture Association, this journal can be ordered by writing Editor, Popular Culture Center, Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, Ohio 43403.

Finding an audience for their research papers has helped my students write lively, informative papers. Gone is the old "cut and paste" paper; in its place is an interesting, accurate synthesis aimed toward a specific audience.